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Is Critique Still Possible in International Relations Theory? A Critical Engagement with IR's Vocation

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Abstract: The article offers a critique of recent efforts to read international relations theory – and its theorists – as especially positioned to offer a critique of international politics. It does so by engaging Daniel Levine's claim that international relations theory has a special vocation for critique which is unparalleled by other disciplines. By problematizing Levine's political, ethical and epistemological approach to sustainable critique, I argue that international relations theory has been particularly engaged with a politics of crisis that centers Western modes of subjectivity as the only frame of reference for thinking about politics and history. As a consequence, Western international relations theory has become both inadequate and dispensable for many critical theorists of international politics in much of the world, even when it comes to its most critical approaches. By way of conclusion, I offer an approach to critical international relations theory that starts from the politics of colonialism, instead of crisis.

Keywords: international relations theory; critical theory; sustainable critique; crisis; periodization; decolonial thought; Eurocentrism.

Introduction

Recent years have seen an enthusiastic engagement with the discussion over the possibility, potentialities, and limits of critique in international relations theory. Of particular importance to this debate is Daniel Levine's award-winning *Recovering International Relations: The Promise of Sustainable Critique* (2012). The book offered a comprehensive account of the development of international relations theory since the aftermath of the Second World War, aiming to identify the grounds on which critique had been attempted in the field, as well as the problems faced by IR literature. Levine's final assessment has been one of repeated failure, namely that international relations theory has striven for

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critique in its multiple fact-value traditions, yet has been consistently incapable of sustaining it. As a result, Levine claims that the international relations theory's vocation for critique has never been adequately fulfilled, which led it to recurrent rounds of reflexivity that have ultimately failed; which resulted in critique in IR having persistently turned into reification.

Levine's reflections came in the wake of a 21st century's surge of interest in the critical purchase of classical realism to think about contemporary international politics. After being wholeheartedly targeted by those aiming to offer a critical approach to international relations theory during the 1980s and 90s, realism has been resubmitted to scrutiny by theorists trying to make a case about its complex history (Molloy 2006; Williams 2005, 2007; Bell 2008). This still emerging literature tries to situate and qualify the contexts of the so-called classical realist authors, with a particular interest in exhuming their critical resources.

This article aims to critically assess the remarkably Eurocentric claim that international relations theory is especially positioned to offer a critique of contemporary international politics. It does so by engaging Daniel Levine's heroic argument that international relations theory has a special vocation for critique which is unparalleled by other disciplines. By problematizing his political, ethical, and epistemological approaches to sustaining critique, I argue that international relations theory – including even its most critical branches – has been particularly engaged with a politics of crisis which centers Western modes of subjectivity as the only frame of reference for thinking about politics and history. As a consequence, international relations theory has become both *inadequate* and *dispensable* for many critical international politics theorists in much of the world.

In what follows, the argument unfolds in three steps. The first section briefly engages with the claim and counterclaim found in many recent debates about international relations theory, that classical realism offers a good starting point for providing a critical theory of international relations, leaving us with Levine's plea for sustainable critique. The following section delves into a careful engagement with the premises and promises of sustainable critique, highlighting the centrality of crisis for Levine's project, which includes an ethos of the *animus habitandi* and a constellational approach to knowledge inspired by the Frankfurt School's critical theorist Theodor Adorno and his concept of negative dialectics. After delineating the ethical, political and epistemological commitments of Levine's sustainable critique, in the third section I argue that such a project inscribes international relations theory within a politics of crisis that remains profoundly blind to the bloody colonial legacy of Western modernity and is therefore unable to offer a critical theory which is deserving of that name. In the concluding section, I tease out some ideas about what critical international relations theory looks like when the referent object is not crisis, but rather colonialism. [1]

In doing so, I hope to contribute to recent debates on the alternative, non-Western variants of critical theory in international relations that denounce its eurocentrism (Hobson 2012); its dependence on white subject-positionings (Sabaratnam 2020); and epistemologies of race (Gruffydd Jones 2016), by offering paths for rupturing its colonial

and racist ethos (Rutazibwa 2016). Overall, the concluding argument pushes critical theorists to dispense with the crisis-driven narrative of international relations theory if we are ever to make room for unmaking 'the imperial-racial origins of IR' (Anievas, Manchanda and Shilliam 2015).

Classical realism as critical theory?

The insight that classical realism has much more to offer to critical political thinking than what neorealism has made of it is old news by now. Indeed, as early as 1981, Robert Cox had already pointed out to the profoundly historical roots of E. H. Carr's legacy and the need for critical theory to resume this form of historical and dialectical approach towards international politics as a way to escape the profoundly limiting account of the sovereign state (Cox 1981). In an even harsher critique, Richard Ashley's (1984) condemnation of the poverty of neorealism pointed to the need to rescue the political wisdom and philosophical sensibility of classical realism from under the pilling stock of neorealist works.

More recent scholarship that attempts at recovering realism's critical roots has turned to the intellectual and political contexts of 'classical realists', looking to reassess their relevance for thinking through contemporary politics. At the center of this attempt to grasp the critical purchase of classical realism lies the recognition that early realist authors had a central concern with the role of values, and fiercely tried to tackle the issue of the role of morality and law to limit or contain the destructive potential of political life. Such normative concerns were crucial to early realist thinkers.

There is not much agreement on which authors can be framed as classical realists. For this reason, much of the revisionist literature tries to relativize the very use of the term 'classical realism', even if it does not give up on its heuristic use altogether[2]. In any case, Morgenthau seems to be the unequivocal figure when it comes to re-inscribing the sense of tragic to think international politics (Frost 2003; Lebow 2003). Of particular interest in Morgenthau's reflections is his ambivalent position concerning the role of morality in politics, and therefore, his tragic awareness about the political realm (Scheuerman 2009; Williams 2007).

Running against that thread, Daniel Levine has put forward an Adornian-inspired approach which, while sympathetic to the efforts of classical realism to reassess the legacy of critique, nonetheless emphasizes its incapacity to provide the basis for a sustainable form of critique. In particular, Levine argues passionately against seeing Morgenthau as a critical theorist, since if on the one hand, he was inspired by some of the same problems that would confront the Frankfurt School, their positions differed greatly 'over what theory was and how it could respond to the challenges of late-modern political life' (Levine 2013: 96). While Morgenthau's practice-oriented theorizing was undoubtedly a stance of normative theory, his brand of it was 'epistemologically and ontologically conservative' (Levine 2013: 96) in that it assumed an unchangeable ontology predicated on human nature, and a deeply flawed epistemology that relied in 'trans-historical ideal types and master concepts' (Levine 2013: 97).

Therefore, even if Morgenthau was able to recognize the profound transformation provoked by the existence of nuclear weapons and the possibility of total war, his analysis 'admit[s] no engagement with late modernity as a radical, systemic break from earlier politics forms, modes, or orders' (Levine 2013: 97). For the author, having acutely identified the crisis of late-modern politics, Morgenthau was incapable of sustaining it, which ultimately led him to 'impasse,' 'despair,' and 'ressentiment.' In that sense, he claims that Morgenthau's understanding of the 20th century political crisis was rather intuitive, and thus inept in providing an answer to the aporias he encountered. In fact, Levine sustains that the entire history of international relations theory has been marked by a critical vocation that cannot be sustained due to the scholars' tendency to fall into reification, by confusing concepts with real-world things.

Forged in the context of the *unparalleled* political crisis of the 20th century and sensitive to the regressive potential of Enlightenment reason (Levine 2012; Williams 2013), international relations theory was meant 'to build a cumulative reservoir of knowledge for stewarding an increasingly dense, heavily armed, and persistently diverse world, whether by creation of new capabilities, institutions, or procedures' (Levine 2012: 3). Contrary to Ashley's pungent attacks on neorealism and positivist theories in general, Levine claims that 'classical realism' was not alone in its self-reflectiveness. According to him, all fact-value traditions of international relations theory have indeed – regardless of their epistemological and methodological premises – shared a 'deeply humanistic desire to play a role in the postwar reconstructive project' (Levine 2012: 5).[3] Thus, according to the author, international relations theory has shared the same sensibilities of the Dialectic of Enlightenment thesis, and has hence looked at the interplay between its positive and critical moments as a way of preventing the reifying tendency of thought.

However, just as it happened with classical realism, the other traditions could not sustain their critical vocation over time, ultimately incurring into reification by focusing on outward criticism and failing to turn their critical gaze inwards. For Levine, then, 'sustainable critique requires criticizing, not the reifying tendency of particular forms of thought, but the reification inherent to all forms of thought'. To do so, sustainable critique becomes an ethical stance of passionate responsibility towards 'the specter of catastrophic violence' that haunts late-modern politics coupled with a rigorous knowledge-building effort. By sustaining critical and practical theory in a single intellectual moment, 'IR needs forms of critique in which theory's ideologically agentic nature is accepted even as theorists continue to strive for 'value freedom'.' (Levine 2012: 12).

International Relations, crisis and the need for sustainable critique

Levine draws on the Frankfurt School – especially on Theodor Adorno's *negative dialectics* – to claim that international relations theory has to find ways of *chastening reason* to confront reification. In order to counter reification, it is first of all necessary to provide a full account of how it operates, and secondly, to offer 'specialized tools' to assist with keeping that process of forgetting in check.

By relying on a heroic self-image, Levine claims that the critical problem of chastening reason is particularly important for international relations theory, because of the discipline's inherent connection to the possibility of mass destruction – which makes it morally responsible for avoiding the recurrence of massively destructive events. Building on the legacy of Frankfurt scholars, Levine offers a typology of the different levels of reification and reflexivity found throughout the multiple fact-value traditions: i. analytical; ii. normative; and iii. vocational.

Analytical reification, mostly commonly found in the value-free tradition of thought, refers to a more superficial process through which concepts are conflated with things-in-themselves, thus leading to a naturalization of what is conventional, and freezing reality into a general, unalterable – thus natural – scheme. On a second level, *normative reification* represents a deeper form of forgetting that affects traditions which criticize the notion of 'value-freedom,' pointing to their perspectiveness and historicity. Normative reification happens when critique becomes uncritical about the form of emancipatory politics that it proposes, thus reifying its normative framework.

Finally, a third and deeper level of reification tends to take place almost imperceptibly: *vocational reification* involves a kind of forgetting that takes place when the theorist ignores that, beyond the methodological and political implications of his practice, he is also a moral agent, responsible for the social realities he helps to bring forth. If the former levels of reification can be checked intellectually, giving the theorist the impression that he can resume his research practice, vocational critique 'requires IR theorists to be constantly vigilant – toward the insufficiencies of their own thinking no less than to that of others – and suggests that ongoing, free-standing critical methods must be developed to meet that requirement' (Levine 2012: 68).

For Levine, sustaining critique is the only possibility to avoid the *tragic consequences* of an unreflective reason associated with the technological tools of mass destruction, through creating 'thinking spaces in which one neither accepted the hopelessness of late modern international politics uncritically nor fled from it' (Levine 2012: 53). Unable to offer a universal solution, the sustainably critical theorist must follow the ethos of *animus habitandi*: 'the will to dwell within or to abide', coupled with a constellational approach to knowledge.

The *animus habitandi* requires a 'constant oscillation between positions of despair and hope', as to preserve the ambiguity of reality, dwelling within it, instead of hastily looking for a solution. Methodologically, this position translates into the constant 'oscillation between different paradigms within IR theory' (Levine 2012: 63). The *animus habitandi* hence provides the affective position and ethos according to which the theorist must frame his or her research in terms of constellations: 'a constellation reminds the theorist that different things are true for different people and that noncontradiction is not an absolute value in the study of social and political things and kinds' (Levine 2012: 108). Thus, constellations work as nodes where concepts juxtapose, retaining their generative contexts while checking each other's identitarian tendency:

> To be effective critique must return to the essential questions Kant raised: What can I know? For what can I hope? And most important of all: *What ought I do?* In the context of scholarly IR, *to what policies, actions, interests, and ideologies will my reifications give aid and comfort if unchastened; not only those I intend or state but also those I do not – mindful of the complex, stochastic processes by which ideas find their way into public sphere?* Thinking is part of the solution, but it is also part of the problem. Meeting the aims of IR is possible only if one can account for both aspects of reason's dialectic (Levine 2012: 114).

In posing the question of sustainable critique in those terms, however, Levine appears to have forgotten the most important and critical question formulated by Kant: *What is a human being?* After all, defining and policing the boundaries of the 'human' under conditions of disenchantment has been the most powerful tool of Western reason in its crafting of the modern/colonial world system (Mignolo, 2000). In many forms, this tool has meant the violent expulsion of otherness.

Following Robbie Shilliam's (2007) critique of Morgenthau here, I argue that such forgetting leads sustainable critique into a *faux pas into* universalism, by stipulating a definitive roadmap for it which is ultimately blind to alterity and to the international dimension of knowledge production. In so doing, sustainable critique continues to centre the liberal project as the universal criteria against which politics could be judged, equating the moral superiority of critique with the ultimate responsibility '"to rearrange [one's] thoughts and actions so that Auschwitz will not repeat itself, so that nothing similar will happen" again' (Adorno apud Levine 2012: 89).

Trapped in a Eurocentric metanarrative, Levine's heroic portrayal of sustainable critique deploys what Hobson has called the 'noble identity myth' coupled with the 'foundationist myth' that recreate the image of a discipline born out of the 'the blood-stained battlefields of Europe' and that carries with it 'the noblest of moral purposes' (Hobson 2012: 15). In doing so, sustainable critique serves 'to defend and celebrate the West as the highest normative referent in world politics,' while remaining blind to the 'dark side' of the discipline of international relations. (Hobson 2012: 15)

To counter such dispositions, critical international thought must be able to account for the generative structure of inter-societal differences and how they affect the development of political thought in a process of comparison and substitution (Shilliam 2007). In what follows, I will offer a critique that, despite of the author's claims to the contrary, points to the centrality of this Eurocentric, white subject-centred vision of Levine's sustainable critique project. As I will argue, Levine's ethics, politics and epistemology remain inscribed within a politics of crisis that ultimately keeps international relations theory tied to its provinciality.

Tragedy, crisis, critique

Levine happily concedes to the fact that Adornian critique 'smuggles in' a specific ontology that presupposes the 'primacy of the political': 'that ontology is tragic: it negates any possibility of escape, mandating instead our reluctant acceptance. We are trapped in a world of our own reified mediations' (Levine 2012: 23). Along with this tragic ontology comes a recognition of international relations theory's *heroic* exceptionality, since 'unlike other disciplines, IR deals with questions of mass violence, war, and death not as limit cases, but as part of its every day *problematique*.' As a consequence, the discipline must *nobly* 'do justice to the potential costs of being misled in an era of constantly impending political-military catastrophe' (Levine 2012: 59).

In this respect, Levine concedes that sustainable critique is closer to 'mainstream IR' than to 'Critical IR Theory'[4] because whereas the latter provides 'a deeply optimistic enterprise' (Levine 2012: 84), the former shares a similar tragic sensibility concerning the 'grim inevitability' of reality (Levine 2012: 83). Unable to go beyond a normative critique, Critical IR Theories 'presume that theorists know what emancipation is and that conceptual transparency will suffice to protect their understandings from unchecked reification' (Levine 2012: 86). They hence presume that critique is a one-time operation to right the wrongs of some aspect of politics, and that once finalized, it will bring about emancipation. Sustainable critique, on the contrary, requires pursuing a vocational critique, i.e. putting critique as the main objective of thought in order to sustain an active chastening of all theorizing.

Despite being unable to provide a proper assessment of Adorno's work, I nonetheless believe that a critique of Levine's position is appropriate. The reason therefore is the fact that I believe Levine's framing of sustainable critique places his project entirely within a 'politics of crisis' which has been keeping international relations theory constantly tied to its Eurocentric – and no less colonial and racist – frames of intelligibility. In order to clarify the full implications of what I am hereby calling a 'politics of crisis', I will briefly resort to the critiques that have been leveled against historical modes of thought, such as the one developed by Reinhart Koselleck.[5]

Koselleck (1988, 2004, 2006) is famous for offering a historical and conceptual reading of the intertwinement between crisis and critique, pointing to the way crisis inaugurates the 'modern age' as the age of crises. His narrative has many similarities with the heroic narrative of the crafting of international relations theory to account for the *tragic political developments* in the aftermath of the Second World War. This account brings forth an important issue of *periodization*, i.e. the tracing of lines in history in order to demarcate the past from the present and the future. Following Kathleen Davis (2008: 3), I resonate with her argument that periodization is 'not simply the drawing of an arbitrary line through time, but a complex process of conceptualizing categories, which are posited as homogeneous and retroactively validated by the designation of a period divide.' According to her, 'the grounding of political order upon periodization' is never neutral and thus has important political implications to the way we conceive of the 'modern' as a totality that ruptures with a dead, fixed past – often read as 'medieval.'

Periodizing history has the effect of creating a temporality of points and lines, in which a homogeneous order is possible only between those points (Narby 2014). Crisis effects these moments that cut past from present, and present from future: in between points of crisis, time flows linearly – empty and homogenous, as famously put by Benedict Anderson. The homogeneous totalities condensed in between points 'not only mask the existence of modern characteristics in the Middle Ages and medieval characteristics in modernity' but also 'occlude minority histories such as those of women and the racially or religiously oppressed' (Davis 2008: 4).

Such knowledgeable acts of demarcation are always political, in that they ground political order precisely by unifying categories that try to homogenize experiences in the very process of knowing, hence exercising a regulatory function. The problem with periodization, then, is not about the quality of the empirical content that it generates, but about the exclusionary and identitarian operation that it effects. The result of such knowledge practices is to legitimize claims for identity and radical newness that end up silencing alterity and evading questions about the implications of partitioning time in such a manner. While the implications of periodization are not investigated, Western modernity unequivocally becomes the only explanatory basis through which we can think of time, order, politics, morality and so on (Davis 2008).

Furthermore, Davis claims that 'the history of periodization is juridical, and it advances through struggles over the definition and location of sovereignty' (Davis 2008: 6). By creating the 'modern' and the 'medieval' as counter concepts, periodization was able to attribute religiosity and slavery to the latter in order to ground claims for secularity and freedom/sovereignty to the former. Thus, 'the liberation of Europe's political, economic, and social life from ecclesiastical authority and religion was defined as the very basis of politics, progress, and historical consciousness'; as a counterpart to this process, 'Europe's 'medieval' past and cultural others, mainly colonized non-Christians, were defined as religious, static, and ahistorical' (Davis 2008: 77). Through a 'complex pattern of identification and rejection' (Davis 2008: 9) 'feudalism' was diametrically opposed to 'secularization,' serving to aseptically clean each of the categories from those which were associated with one another, as to prioritize the latter over the former.

For Davis, therefore, periodization works as a form of 'sovereign decision' which offers a substitute for the 'absent foundation of sovereignty' (Davis 2008: 15), occluding any serious discussion on its paradoxical operation. According to her, the effects of this occlusion are evident both in the 'triumphalist' narratives of sovereignty, which justify modernity through a narrative of secularization – such as those seen in Weber (2004) and Schmitt (1985, 2007) – and in those which, like Koselleck's, criticize this reading of history without questioning the importance of periodization as such. For Davis, then:

> [Koselleck's] theory of periodization may be persuasive when viewed from within the self-defining 'modern European' political discourse […] but cannot be separated from the contemporaneous and interrelated discourses of 'world order' such as anthropology and Orientalism (Davis 2008: 90).

In fact, these knowledge practices that structure historical modes of knowing have also been targeted by Johannes Fabian's critical assessment of the colonial legacy of anthropology's historical discourses. According to the author, even if anthropology had come a long way in recognizing its complicity to colonization, it nevertheless continued to deploy a politically charged temporal discourse to know the Other in ways that, while cognizant of the shared time of the ethnological encounters, continued to produce temporal distancing by denying the sharing of present time (Fabian 2014; Lage, Chamon 2016: 2). This 'persistent and systematic tendency to place the referent(s) of anthropology in a Time other than the present of the producer of anthropological discourse' Fabian (2014: 31) has called 'denial of coevalness.' Periodization, as the move which inaugurates a historical discourse which grants hegemony to the sovereign subject of knowledge by neatly demarcating the past from the present and giving primacy to the latter is the same one that legitimized the supremacy of the West beyond its others through the continued denial of coevalness.

For Davis, if periodization is the basis upon which secularization narratives reside – and 'the 'secular' is above all a bid for sovereignty' (Davis 2008: 78), then while we do not succeed in questioning this periodization, we likewise cannot rethink modern sovereignty and international politics. Yet, as Fasolt clarifies, it is not only historical forms of knowledge that promote this sovereign act of periodization. In fact, modern scholarship itself makes a break in time every time 'it distinguishes what we know now from what we formerly believed' (Fasolt 2011: 423). Scholarship is always already a political activity, and the act of knowing evidence historically is clearly 'an act of self-determination by which the sovereign subject assumes her rightful place in time' (Fasolt 2004: 14).

For Fasolt, this practice of periodization of history is an enduring symbol of the victory of European humanism against the form of governance represented by the Roman Empire and the Church, putting an end to the belief in the temporal unity of the period inaugurated by the birth of Christ. In this process, 'the affirmation of the self that was integral to the rise of history extended across the entire realm of thought and action' (Fasolt 2004: 20), hence shaping new forms of science, law, religion, and art. Thus, the historical approach – which is always already modern, by making the interpretation of time a matter of human agency, emancipated it from every transcendental authority.

This same operation that objectifies the past makes the subject fully present, thinking and acting on the other side of the line, the side which is not absent, and not immutable – being, therefore, open to change. Through erecting borders in time, history also assures a realm for the development of the modern subject that can reunite his reason and autonomy in the workings of the present and the future. By doing so, it stipulates a moment of foundation – of history and (modern) politics, of past and present, of the modern subject, with his freedom, his citizenship, his sovereignty, his future. In this sense, all forms of knowledge predicated on the autonomous, knowing subject are already modern in the sense that they are always already predicated on periodization. This form of knowledge 'leaves much room to fight over the meaning and possibility of liberty, progress, and

responsibility. But there may be no other fight in town. Someone must be responsible, and someone must be free' (Fasolt 2004: xviii).

Therefore, Fasolt concludes that trying 'to undo [scholarship's] links to politics without undoing scholarship itself can only come to a dead end' (Fasolt 2011: 423). To question periodization is to question Western practices of knowledge, which, in turn, can only result from questioning the sovereign subject of knowledge, problematizing the representational role of language. The reason therefor is the fact that language does not belong to the individual, and it can hence break with the illusion of sovereignty. Through this process one can perhaps appreciate that 'the past is not an object that must be represented because it is absent from the present'; rather, 'the past is something that we have […] right here and now, just as we have a body and a mind' (Fasolt 2011: 423).

These questions are important not because they help to refute periodization altogether, but because they point to the decisionistic, sovereign function of historical modes of thought. Indeed, they indicate how periodization is 'a fundamental political technique – a way to moderate, divide and regulate – always rendering its services *now*' (Davis 2008: 5). In this sense, these are questions that open the possibility of accounting for different temporalities/temporalisations; different forms of knowledge and subjectivity. Correspondingly, they also bring to the discussion the question of the present that is no longer linearly tied to the (immutable) past and the (completely new) future. They might help to account for a temporal experience that is not predicated on the pair immutability/novelty – either nothing has changed, or everything has – thus enabling the possibility for resisting the denial of coevalness that continues to place the Other at a distance from the modern West in ways that can only serve to dehumanize and silence alterity.

This discussion allows us to visualize how appeals to crisis are inherent appeals to a very specific form of temporality and temporalization tied with the presupposition of the Western sovereign subject. In fact, the appeal to crisis serves to reproduce a specific account of politics which is predicated in the European state, sovereignty, and law. This discussion points to the limits of 'crisis theory' to question the form of politics that emerges from the temporality that crisis itself inaugurates.

Coming back to Levine, his argument about sustaining critique becomes an imperative to sustaining crisis, as he argues in a number of passages. Thus, for instance, the author characterizes sustainable critique as 'not the reconciliation of mutually incommensurate accounts of reality, but the tools by which to preserve those accounts alongside one another in their full irreducibility'; in order to do that, sustainable critique must be able "to activate a crisis in the social sciences' and sustain it, at least insofar as this applies to the study of world politics' (Levine 2012: 25). Later on, when providing the basis to distinguish sustainable critique from Critical IR Theory, he once again argues that 'sustainable critique does not aim to provide seamless reconstructions of world politics or promise coherent, continuous discourses of world politics'; instead, it seeks 'to make individuals and polities aware of how deep skepticism must go in an era when crisis has become endemic to the human condition' (Levine 2012: 112).

In a different passage, he again claims: 'Viewing recent decades as a period of sustained political and philosophical crisis, the practices of sustainable critique called for here try to salvage those ideals that have historically animated IR, even as it fragments the conceptual tools most often used to realize them' (Levine 2012: 227). So, when he criticizes Morgenthau's position for its epistemological and methodological poverty, Levine argues that 'left with nowhere to go, [Morgenthau] redoubles its exhortations, deepening a sense of urgency and crisis, while providing no tools by which to either resolve or sustain it. With nowhere to go, it festers into backlash' (Levine 2012: 127).

It is no surprise then that crisis appears in his study not only as the condition of thinking, but also as the object of study proper to international relations theory. Indeed, Levine replays a common self-image of international relations theory in/as crisis (Carr 1946; Souza 2017). When applying his constellational approach to the Middle East conflict, Levine does seem to be sensitive to the potentially negative effects of a discourse of crisis by calling attention to a 'a constant percussion-beat of crisis and emergency impoverishes policy discourses by inducing haste, and a penumbra of dreams, beliefs, prejudices, and hopes creates a minefield of partisan sensibilities' (Levine 2012: 254). However, any further reflection of this impoverishment brought about by a crisis narrative is obliterated and ignored throughout his presentation of the objectives of sustainable critique.

An important aspect of this blind spot in Levine's work comes out of the tragic sensibility he purports to sustain. However rich this tragic view may be, it cannot deliver Levine from the game he is trying to reinvent. As I see it, Levine seems intent to change the rules by which the game is played – and in doing so, change the game. However, he ends up accepting all of its rules, even while he claims to be trying to reinvent the game.

As he buys into the Western narrative of crisis, Levine is also smuggling in: i. a very Eurocentric temporality which presupposes ii. a very exclusive form of subjectivity that Sabaratnam (2020) called white subject-positioning, which is tied to the sovereign subject of knowledge that remains unchanged in the course of knowing, and finally; iii. A Schmittian account of politics that is tied to the opposition between friends and enemies. The temporality of crisis ties Levine's project to a strict form of periodization: the 20th century crisis is depicted as an exceptional moment to be dealt with by exceptional individuals (those who are able to sustain critique). As argued above, this temporality of crisis is one of points and lines: in between two points, order can be installed, but only on the condition that its disruption legitimizes all attempts to restore order – either in terms of the violence of law or the violence of the sovereign decision. Either way, the rules of the game remain unaltered.

This temporality of crisis is precisely the one aspect which frees the sovereign subject of knowledge – who, speaking from the present, assumes that he or she speaks with a sovereign voice, and is thus able to change the course of history: to stop Auschwitz from ever happening again. The (dead) past becomes an object from which one can learn through evidence, but never change. Therefore, the subject in question feels justified to judge all temporal others from his or her own point of view, mobilizing their own Eurocentric kind of knowledge and their own Western historical *a priori*. This sovereign subject of

knowledge – identical to him or herself, despite claims to the contrary – knows he or she cannot know everything. These subjects thus search for how to deal with their own finitude by submitting their certainties to the constant criticism of a court of reason that must be in session at all times. In doing so, he or she can hope not to find the transcendental, but at least to avert the consequences of reason gone unchecked.

These are exactly the rules of the 'politics of crisis' that Levine buys into: his time is the time of crisis. He does seem to understand the problems with the imaginary of crisis, and the risk of trying to get out of it, to find a solution to it. That is why he wants to offer the resources for sustaining the crisis – thus keeping the risks of reason gone unchecked at bay. The sovereign subject of knowledge is then summoned to do the only thing he or she can do: preventing him or herself from forgetting his or her own limits and thus pretending to know the world. How to do that? One must sustain all traditions alongside one another: not to find a synthesis among them, but to provide the means for chastening one another.

What is the problem with this framework? Just like Kant's, Levine's court of reason is always in session, and the presupposition of a juridical critique remains unchanged. Even if the critical reason here is supposed to be hinged on the ethos to dwell within or to abide, this ethos emanates from a fully formed moral subject that remains unchanged in the course of knowing; his or her knowledge may change, but he or she remains identical throughout the entire process. Levine thus comes full circle: having fallen prey to a Eurocentric epistemology that remains unable to confront the subject of knowledge and its white subject-positioning, he finds himself trapped in a Schmittian, crisis-ridden politics of friends and enemies, where the best one can hope for is avoiding (Western) catastrophe. The heroically noble discipline of international relations, then, appears to hold the superior moral responsibility for policing this boundary, since it is specially placed to deal with this inevitable crisis – indeed, it is a White discipline. The present is a time of crisis separated from the (dead) past and the (not-yet) future by two points of crisis: the crisis which inaugurates Western modernity and the one that risks putting an end to it, to disrupt the order of crisis.

What I am arguing here, then, is that once we accept Levine's solution for sustaining critique – sustaining crisis, we have already accepted the idea that human finitude must be seen as a tragic predicament from which there is no scape. This is a 'grim inevitability' after all. In this scenario, treating all forms of knowledge as equally relevant – since no one holds the key to a superior form of knowledge – becomes our best hope to avoid mass destruction. The stakes are high, so we should be responsible – and responsibility becomes a matter of chastening reason and limiting the tragic consequences of reification. This is a presumption that I find very difficult to sustain.

By framing the problem of a constellational approach in terms of different forms of knowing, in which 'each captures a slice of reality' (Levine 2012: 56), Levine completely dismisses a more important question which is not cumulative – that more forms of knowledge give a clearer view of the total reality – but reconstructive of reality. We cannot assume all positions to be trying to approach a slice of reality: this presumption already leaves the different understandings of what reality is – or the different realities in which

people live unquestioned – and, therefore, what kinds of knowledge are adequate for dealing with it. It is only by leaving the ontological questions unaccounted for that Levine is then able to provide his ethos for the *animus habitandi* with its ensuing methodology of constellations. This has the effect of leaving the politics of crisis completely untouched and operational.

An important question that remains inaccessible in Levine's scheme – what is a human being? – would perhaps allow him to move beyond the sovereign subject of knowledge to properly inquire the production of the modern human in all of its exclusions. This is an ethical question that precedes the court of reason and that remains circumscribed in his scheme. In light of that, I argue that the challenge of critically thinking about international politics requires a deconstruction of the Western approaches to critical IR – which is at the same time a reconstruction of the field. An actual *international* critical thought cannot be devised while accepting all of the rules of the game posed by an imperial, racist West and try to change the result that way. The constellational approach of sustainable critique is, in the perspective invited here, remarkably Eurocentric.

The decision upon the 'best' way to 'know' something can never occur in a vacuum, and thus it cannot rely on a universal proposition such as 'to avoid Auschwitz again.' Just as Cox and Horkheimer (2002[1937]) before him argued, 'theory is always *for* someone and *for* some purpose' (Cox 1981: 207). Before assuming that the best way to approach knowledge is to sustain 'multiple and incompatible ways of seeing' alongside one another, I first need to ask 'for whom and for what purpose' I pursue knowledge – which might radically change our ways of understanding knowledge itself. Thus, critique, according to my approach here, requires a previous ethical and political decision concerning what is knowledge, what is the world (or worlds), and what is the relationship between these two.

There is no room in Levine to debate crisis: crisis is presupposed, not argued. It offers the ultimate condition upon which he justifies the need to move into sustainable critique. This apparently unapologetic and neutral recognition – that we live in a time of crisis that is particularly problematic for the amount of destruction that it is able to provoke – performs, I argue, one of the worst forms of reification. It reifies the ontological condition of modernity and, with it, the kind of human subject able to inquire and produce critical knowledge about it – knowledge which, once produced, may be able to avert catastrophe. Levine's court of reason is open to critiquing all positions that stand in this same ontological ground. In doing so, it obliterates all possibility of discussion of the critical project: there is only room for a cosmopolitan (Spivak 2012) dialogue. And yet, the preconditions of a truly multi-vocal dialogue – a cosmopolitics, perhaps (Stengers 2005; Danowski, Viveiros de Castro 2014) – are not discussed, and the dialogue runs the risk of becoming a monologue, or a dialogue between subjects who accept a series of ontological, epistemological, ethical, and political assumptions concerning the world, its crisis, how to know it and why to know it. After all, knowledge ultimately serves to avert catastrophe. In the end, we are back to survival mode. Fear must guide the duty to dialogue – even if the stakes, the voices and the possibilities of this dialogue are already set in stone.

From crisis to colonialism: reframing critical international relations theory

As argued, narratives about crisis fall prey to the Eurocentric, Whiggish assumption that the history of Europe and the US is the history of the 'international' – or even the 'world.' There is no room in this narrative to question whether the humanistic crisis of the 20th century has anything exceptional: it is just assumed to be so. And there are gatekeepers all around to make sure we don't dare to question that assumption. But there is also an extensive – and growing – critical literature within international relations theory daring to decolonize Western modes of thought and knowledge practices, pointing to a myriad of possibilities to account, confront and pluralize human history, including the very category of the 'human.'

Without being able to go deep into this vast and productive camp where critical theories about international politics are being multiplied, it might be worthwhile to remember that already in the 1970's, Dependency Theory[6] had offered a very different assessment of 'the twenty-years crisis'. This assessment is quite at odds with the prevailing image of a 'world' in disarray, for the crises of Anglo-European countries had a substantively positive impact in the development of South American economies and societies.

Far from arguing that development is a good thing[7], what I am merely trying to indicate is that the narrative of crisis assumes a *universality* of experiences throughout *one* world that takes no account of the different histories, knowledges and myths erected and lived by multiple others that might contest the view of a universal historical trajectory bringing the world into the international. Inviting such normative and political stories in without looking for the ultimate recipe for countering reification seems like a safer bet for promoting a critical debate that does not refute the role of alterity in international politics and international relations theory.

In this regard, Mustapha Pasha has made a case concerning the stubbornness of Western international relations 'to embrace its own peculiarity' (Pasha 2011: 217). This stubbornness is always already encompassed in the narrative of crisis which I analyze here, one that 'allows a *particular* intellectual practice with *particular* imaginaries and rationalities to serve as a universal reference for *all* IR theoretical practices with alternative imaginaries and rationalities' (Pasha 2011: 217). While international relations theory continues to be practiced in such a register, pleas for pluralization can only be read as pleas for marginalization of all that cannot be stated in terms of universal propositions – or that cannot hope to be sustainable throughout. There may be room for considering localized critiques inside international relations theory, so long as they do not shatter the image of a coherent – if only slightly confused – discipline. As Pasha puts it, 'in extreme cases […] naughty dissenters who refuse to be co-opted are given the option of exile to the borderlands of the discipline, stripped of effective power, but with the right of protest' (Pasha 2011: 217). While this inclusive exclusion is promoted,

> […] the boundaries are vigorously defended with strict enforcement mechanisms to determine what does or does not constitute IR.

> Epistemology and methodology provide the gatekeeping function to place questions of ontology or history on the margins. In other cases, a particular classification of the *international* becomes the determining factor to grant entry or rejection (Pasha 2011: 217).

In light of this, it is impossible for me to think how international relations theory could claim any ground for critique when it ultimately despises all stories about colonialism and the imperial encounter as secondary themes. Besides, when it treats those themes as objects of knowledge about the international, rather than nodal experiences that have allowed for knowledge production as we know it, and thus that may have a direct impact in the transformation of these practices. To rehearse an argument that has already been voiced many times and yet cannot be heard by international relations theory, there can be no theory of modernity – and therefore, of the international – without seriously confronting the legacy of colonialism (Quijano 2000; Mignolo 2000).

As long as international relations as a discipline keeps rehearsing its theories without taking stock of colonialism; while it keeps presupposing the purposes for which knowledge may serve and therefore who is entitled to pursue it and how, it will continue to participate in the very real and very bloody projects that the crisis narrative tells us it is precisely trying to avoid. *Meanwhile, in light of that acknowledgement, I do not think that critique is possible in international relations theory*.

By way of conclusion, I would like to offer some ideas about what critical international relations theory would look like if we started from the politics of colonialism, instead of crisis. What are the political, ethical, and epistemological openings that could be created by shifting the fundamental assumptions about the role of critical international relations theory away from the Eurocentric, heroic – and racist – narratives about the expansion of the modern world and towards a decolonial reading of the violent and unequal production of modernity/coloniality?

I do believe, like Levine, that international relations theory holds a very important place in the debate about critique, but not because it has any special vocation at that – just as it has no special claim to crisis – but because it presupposes that 'we' have/live in the 'international;' i.e. it presents itself out as the discipline appropriate for thinking not only about particular states, cultures or societies, but about the relations between them. In this sense, and for these ambitions, international relations theory has indeed a certain responsibility to critique in that it has to confront the question of difference and plurality[8], big and small – differences that mark particular bodies and that are reflected and manifested in personal relations just as much as in foreign policy decisions. There is no possibility of claiming the international – let alone the world or the globe (Walker 2010) – without at least providing some means for accounting for these differences. To quote Pasha again, 'the task here, it seems, is not additive but reconstructive' (Pasha 2011: 218).

Having said that, my claim here is that the stakes of international relations theory are too high to be left to be debated by international relations theorists (usually in terms of the adequate form of theorizing or pluralizing the field). Borrowing from Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000) here, we might want to claim that international relations theory is both inadequate

and indispensable: it needs to be provincialized as to dislocate its almost natural association to the cannon of Western history, rather than being dismissed as irrelevant.

However, perhaps some of us are tired of trying to dwell within a discourse that makes one invisible, or else, illegitimate. Therefore, I can see the reason why Shilliam would charge the Europe of Chakrabarty as 'a fantasy through and through, but one that damages different peoples with different intensities' (Shilliam 2011). This means that Europe is a product of the imagination, not a factual accomplishment; this fantasy encompasses the unattainable norms of production of both Europeans and their others: 'the whys, hows and shoulds of people suffering, surviving, accommodating, avoiding, resisting and diverting the colonial relation and its many neo- and post- articulations' (Shilliam 2011). For some people, these norms and promises of 'Europe' are not dispensable for they were never indispensable. And yet, he claims, Europe must be dispensed with. As I am reading it here, the same goes for Eurocentric international relations theory, even in its critical variants.

A way to dispense with international relations theory can be found in Olivia Rutazibwa's decolonial research strategy which is sustained by a triple operation: de-mythologizing, de-silencing and de-colonizing everyday practices as a way to reorganize our analytical approaches to the social and to the international (Rutazibwa 2016). Problematizing John Hobson's claim that scientific racism should be distinguished from both eurocentrism and imperialism, and that racism is no longer a legitimate category to account for international relations theories after 1945, Rutazibwa makes a powerful case against periodization. By tackling the periodizing move that serves to create a non-racist world after 1945, her argument speaks directly to the need of breaking with the politics of crisis that sustains the 'tragic tradition' of critical international relations theory discussed in the first part of this article, thus reclaiming the contemporary importance of the debate about racism (which Rutazibwa calls the R-debate).

The first operation of de-mythologizing tackles a fundamental trope erected around 'the individualized bias of innocence, intentionality and intensity', according to which a person, practice or tradition can only be considered racist when individual responsibility and bad intentions can be clearly attributed to those involved, in a sense comparable to what 'Hitler would have done.' The problem with this is that

> A systematic individualized approach to racism through the figure of 'the evil racist', leaves us with an incapacity to have an open and constructive engagement with this system of, by definition, racialized coloniality, that is, a matrix of power that allows for the normalization and perpetuation of extreme power inequalities, allowing for systematic dispossession, violence and even death of racialized peoples (Rutazibwa 2016:195).

Therefore, while she recognizes the strategic reasons for critical thinkers to avoid the R-word – preferring the charge of Eurocentrism instead – as a way to keep the debate

open, she provokes us to think about the implications of such strategic reluctance to the people who are directly affected by racist hierarchies on a daily basis.

The second operation of de-silencing responds precisely to this question of whose voices and stories are to be counted as legitimate and knowledgeable when it comes to deciding on matters of racism and the ways to address them. People whose experiences and suffering are directly affected by racist structural practices hardly ever make it into the 'race experts' conversation, and when they do, their embodied approach is never respected as equally legitimate. Decolonially de-silencing, thus, is a call to recognize 'the continued circumstances of coloniality and structural racism in the everyday' as the 'guiding principle in how to analytically organize our study of the social and the international' (Rutazibwa 2016:197).

De-colonizing, the ensuing third operation, then tackles the forms of periodization that were previously analyzed in this article, by reframing the temporal cut that separates racism in a before and an after, past and present. Here, Rutazibwa reminds us of the 'power of the Hitlerian moment' as a periodizing discourse that separates the previous currency of scientific racism from the present illegitimacy of racism as a form of violence – and therefore as an analytical category after 1945. Such discourse serves to dismiss the use of the R-word and diminish the gravity and violence of racist practices and traditions in the present, framing the problem as one of hurt feelings and emotions about something that is said to be in the past. De-colonizing, in this sense, requires undoing the link between the R-debate and the emotions of individuals and groups, recognizing that the legitimacy of the former 'lies precisely in the fact that it is about structural well-being and justice for the whole of society, something that can only be done by systematically taking the past and the past in the present seriously' (Rutazibwa 2016:198).

A decolonial research strategy of de-silencing, de-mythologizing and de-colonizing hence becomes a powerful antidote against the politics of crisis which sustains even the most critical Western approaches to international relations theory, particularly by problematizing the periodizing moves that separate out the past and the present in order to offer an identitarian, heroic approach to Western modernity's legacies. Therefore, it makes way for reclaiming the transformative, reconstructive power of critical theory in international relations, by centering the present reality of coloniality and racism in the everyday life of the international. As a conclusion, I claim that starting with colonialism, and not crisis, allows us to confront Western temporal tropes of modernity, thus opening space for: i. thinking of politics beyond the Schmittian ontology of friends and enemies tragically confronting each other in an anarchical realm; ii. sustaining an ethos that is first and foremost anti-colonial and anti-racist; and iii. pursuing decolonial epistemologies that defy white subject-positionings and racist knowledge practices.

Notes

1 I thank one of the anonymous reviewers for pushing me to further develop my argument against critical international relations theory beyond the charge of Eurocentrism, to devise some alternative ways of framing critical theory.

2 Duncan Bell (2009) maps these critical reenactments, suggesting the existence of an expansive and a restrictive view of realism: whereas the former (Thucydides, Hobbes, Machiavelli, and Clausewitz) relies on a more abstract and generalizing approach towards the notion of realism, the latter (Morgenthau, Carr, Niebuhr, Herz, Aron) is more concerned with the developments of the 20th century, and focuses more explicitly on authors who have written, among other disciplines, in the context of international relations and international political thinking in a more general way.

3 Throughout his book, Levine analyses three fact-value traditions in international relations theory in order to identify their approach to critique and their inability to sustain it: Realism; Communitarianism; and Individualism. He parses each of these traditions in their different methodological approaches, namely metaphysical, middle-range and third way. See Levine, 2012, Chapters 3-5. It is telling that the traditions he puts under investigation do not include the 'dissidents' or any of the more radically reflexive accounts to thought. Richard Shapcott's review of his book points out precisely this gap in the analysis. See Shapcott (2014).

4 The approaches he is trying to account for under this label comprise the 'Welsh School' critical security studies (CSS) and the Critical IR Theory (CIRT) that follows from the works of Habermas, Horkheimer, Beck and others. For a fuller account of his position concerning Critical IR Theory, see Levine (2012), Chapter 2. It is also worth noting that, as opposed to Williams, who claimed some proximity to the work done by 'poststructuralism,' Levine clearly distances his own sustainably critical position from the 'dissidents.' According to his view, 'dissidence […] has been confused with critique. Yet the two are distinct: the latter speaks to relatively stable conditions of intellectual possibility, given the limits of thought, its reliance on reification, and the demands of practice; the former to what a dynamic marketplace of political values and movements will bear.' (Levine 2012: 82)

5 A more profound engagement with this discussion over the limits of a politics of crisis for a critical international relations theory was the object of my PhD dissertation. See Souza 2017.

6 Cardoso and Faletto (2010) offer a historical account of the 20th century from the standpoint of the social and economic development of Latin America, which strongly contrasts with the prevailing views offered by international relations theory.

7 For a challenging critique of development and the construction of the 'Third World,' see Escobar (1995).

8 For a comprehensive argument about the necessity and potential of international relations theory engaging with difference, see Inayatullah and Blaney (2004).

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A crítica ainda é possível na Teoria das Relações Internacionais? Um engajamento crítico com a vocação de RI

O artigo oferece uma crítica dos esforços recentes para ler a teoria das relações internacionais – e seus teóricos – como especialmente posicionados para oferecer uma crítica da política internacional. Ele faz tal crítica ao engajar com a afirmação de Daniel Levine de que a teoria das relações internacionais tem uma vocação especial para a crítica que é inigualável em relação a outras disciplinas. Ao problematizar a abordagem política, ética e epistemológica de Levine para uma crítica sustentável, defendo que a teoria das relações internacionais tem estado particularmente engajada com uma política de crise que centraliza os modos de subjetividade ocidentais como o único quadro de referência para se pensar sobre política e história. Como consequência, a teoria ocidental das relações internacionais tornou-se inadequada e dispensável para muitos teóricos críticos da política internacional em grande parte do mundo, mesmo no caso das suas abordagens mais críticas. Para concluir, ofereço uma abordagem da teoria crítica das relações internacionais que parte da política do colonialismo, ao invés da crise.

Palavras-chave: teoria das relações internacionais; teoria crítica; crítica sustentável; crise; periodização; pensamento decolonial; eurocentrismo

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